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THE NOTEBOOK SYSTEM OF THEME CORRECTING

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Most teachers of English composition in high schools and colleges will agree that the primary purpose of such a course is the teaching of accuracy of expression. For the exceptional student, to be sure, the finer shades of style may be taught with profit, and for all students a certain amount of time may well be spent in striving simply to provoke thought. But four-fifths of the energy of the teacher of composition in the high school and in the Freshman class at college must be given to an attempt to get his students to write correctly and accurately. No one who has not taught these classes can imagine the crudeness in expression of the students who come into them. Even the students with real talent often need much drill before they can write without technical errors; and for the great majority it is necessary that the teacher spend his time and energy in the attempt to teach the simplest fundamentals of composition. If, when he has finished his work, the members of his class can all spell correctly, punctuate accurately, use good grammar and diction and a correct and expressive sentence structure, he can feel that his work as a teacher of elementary composition has been well done. If he be a real teacher, he will have stirred up thought among his students and will have helped them in countless other ways toward a true grasp of style; but he will not, in any event, have neglected to teach them the one great lesson of accuracy.

This cardinal principle is, I suppose, very generally admitted among teachers of composition. But even so simple a task as the teaching of accuracy is by no means easy. Certainly a good percentage of the students in these courses fail to do their work satisfactorily, and the teachers are seldom contented with their own efforts. The facts taught in a course in composition are few enough; the maxims could be set down in a page. But at the end of the session there are always a large number of students who have not made

the improvement in their work that they should have made in a month. Anyone can learn to spell if he puts his mind to it, and the same thing is true of punctuation, and diction, and grammar, and sentence-structure. These principles are reducible to a rather exact science, and every student of ordinary intelligence *can* get them. I really believe that not more than 2 per cent of the students in composition courses would fail if they could be made to put their best efforts into the task of mastering the cardinal principles of composition.

The whole center of the trouble seems to me to lie in the fact that although a teacher may spend fifteen minutes in the marking of the errors on a theme, the student in too many cases fails to look beyond the general comment or the grade, and rarely examines into the nature of his individual errors. It used to be a common experience of mine that students came to me for a conference on themes when they had really never examined the corrected themes before coming into the room. Even if they had done so and had corrected some of the errors in the margin, it was always easier to say, "I didn't know what to do with that sentence," than to take the trouble to correct it. If the student really makes an honest effort to correct a sentence and fails, it is, of course, the real purpose of the conference to meet this difficulty. My experience, however, has been that, unless I have some definite method of dealing with this question, all my poorer students shirk the correcting of themes. In many cases I tried the re-writing of themes, but I found three objections to this method of procedure: The student would dodge the issue by writing sentences that evaded the difficulties in question, and the second theme frequently brought up new errors that were quite as bad as those in the first. Moreover, the reading of these themes doubled my work.

Within the last year and a half I have been making special efforts, with the help of some of my colleagues in the University of Texas, to solve this problem of making the student really correct his errors. We have worked out what we all believe has proved to be a very satisfactory method. It has brought about the result that the students are forced to correct all the mistakes marked on their themes, and to correct them in such a way that they can tell

at a glance in what branch of composition their most frequent errors are occurring. Moreover, it has made the work of the conferences concrete and much more helpful to the student than it had been before. The purpose of the present paper is to explain this method so that other teachers who have experienced the troubles I mention may have the opportunity of trying it for themselves.

We have the student divide a notebook into five parts, as follows: (1) spelling and capitalization, (2) punctuation and form, (3) grammar, (4) diction, (5) sentence-structure. These parts he separates with a heavy sheet of some kind, on which he pastes an index flap so that he can turn to any particular division of the notebook without delay. The pages of the book he rules down the center, and places at the head of the left-hand column the word "Error" and at the head of the right-hand column the word "Correction." The books are then ready to receive the corrections from the themes that are handed back to the students.

Next, we arrange the symbols for the correction of themes as nearly as may be under these five heads, so that the student will have no doubt as to where to enter his corrections. Mistakes involving the re-writing of whole paragraphs or a radical change in the whole theme are not usually entered in the book; for these cases nothing short of a complete re-writing will suffice. It is for the correction of those smaller errors that constitute nine-tenths of the young student's difficulties with English that the notebook is provided. When he has the symbols classified, he is ready to correct any theme that is given back to him. Taking the theme, he will enter the mistakes of sentence-structure, diction, grammar, punctuation, or spelling in the section of the notebook devoted to those errors. In the columns marked "Error" he will first record the date of the theme and then the sentence in which the mistake has occurred. He should leave the mistake uncorrected and should underscore it. Directly opposite he will correct the sentence in the column marked "Correction." In case the error has not been an obvious one and the student has been compelled to look the matter up in a handbook, he will record the section of the handbook in which the mistake is discussed.

The general scheme of the notebook page will be seen from the following example:

DICTION	
Error	Correction
January 15 He tried in vain to convince the <i>balance</i> of the students.	§ 225 He tried in vain to convince the <i>rest</i> of the students.
January 22 My brother and <i>myself</i> consider this my best photograph.	§ 219 My brother and <i>I</i> consider this my best photograph.

In practically all cases we have insisted that the entire incorrect sentence be copied, except in the case of spelling. Here only the word is needed. It is obvious that it is not necessary to record a whole sentence in order to show all errors of grammar or punctuation, but unless a student can discriminate it is well enough to have him write the entire sentence, lest he make it so fragmentary as to lose the whole point of the correction. We do not hesitate, of course, to tell students of discretion that they need copy only so much of a sentence as will illustrate the nature of the error. Such students are, however, very rare in proportion to those who must follow the letter of the law.

That is really all there is to the system. The student records the actual mistakes he has made, and corrects them in a place in which all the mistakes of a similar kind are kept. If he has few mistakes, he has little to record in the notebook. He is saved the useless labor of re-writing the parts of the theme in which there are no errors. He has all his mistakes of punctuation or diction together, where he may see them and may see the same error showing itself often enough to persuade him to master the principle he is so frequently violating.

The difficulties we feared when we first considered the trial of the notebook were not borne out by our experience. We feared that the students would shirk and not put all their corrections into the book, but we have found it very easy to check them. We have them bring their themes as well as their notebooks to the conference, and, taking some page from a theme, we ask them to show us in

the notebook how certain things have been corrected. There can be no possible excuse for not having the sentence entered at least on the "Error" side of the column, and if a sentence is found that is not entered at all, the student is given "Failure" on his notebook. This point is well understood among students, and if the teacher insists, they will keep their notebooks faithfully. Out of sixty-five at my last conference, only one had a notebook that was not reasonably satisfactory.

We were also afraid that, even though it would no doubt make the students' work more accurate and the instruction more concrete, it would nevertheless take more time in the conference than the old system of talking over the themes without notebooks. We have found, on the contrary, that along with the increase in concreteness there has come a definiteness of purpose in the conference that really makes the work lighter. The student brings his notebook and we look over the "Correction" side of the ledger to see if there are still any errors and if the student has really caught the point of the correction. Sentences that he has been unable to correct will be entered on the "Error" side and will be left blank on the right-hand side. Most of the attention of the teacher at the conference can be devoted directly to the clearing up of these points that the student has been unable to correct. Usually, if he takes the trouble to write the sentence on one side, he will go ahead and make a real effort to correct the sentence, so that he has, as a rule, done his best before he comes to the conference. If the student seems to have shirked, he may be checked up in the manner already mentioned. Finally, a general glance over the notebook will serve to show the teacher and the student what it is that the student must work on. The conference thus becomes very concrete, and is likely to have much more definite results than one in which no classification of errors has been made.

As a means of review the notebook has shown itself to have distinct advantages. A student can now tell you definitely, "My trouble is with diction. I have had fifteen mistakes of diction, and only three of sentence-structure and four of punctuation. I have had no corrections to make in the spelling and grammar sections." When a student realizes just what his weakness is, his

study for examination as well as his regular work assumes a definiteness that keeps him from floundering around. He knows exactly where he must apply his best efforts.

All of us who have used the notebook system are now so wedded to it that we should find the teaching of composition difficult without it. We feel that with it we have been able to solve in large measure the very troublesome problem of accuracy in writing, for we do not find the students persisting in the same errors to the degree that they did before they made use of the notebook. We have felt that the saving of time and energy and the increased efficiency of the teaching are so great that we should like to see the plan tried by our colleagues in other colleges and schools. It is not, of course, a panacea, but it does make the teaching of composition more concrete and effective than any other method we have been able to find.